

# Sacramento Valley rice farmers say they will grow less due to drought

**Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee, 4-18-15**

Rice farmers from north of Sacramento said Friday that further water cutbacks this year will force them to shrink their acreage even more than they did in 2014.

With agriculture coming under criticism statewide for using much of the state's water while making up a relatively small part of its economy, the farmers invited reporters to a field about 5 miles north of Sacramento International Airport to offer a different perspective on their industry. They stressed that the impact of water cutbacks in the case of rice will be more than economic.

Joined by members of the nonprofit Ducks Unlimited, the growers pointed to the importance of the rice industry in providing habitat for fish, snakes and waterfowl. And they said they would grow as much as they can.

"With water, with every molecule, I'm thinking fish, farms, fowl," said Fritz Durst, 35, who grows rice on 500 acres near Knights Landing. "We're determined to be mindful of not only our needs but environmental needs."

Growers said previously announced water allocation cutbacks ranging from 25 percent to 100 percent likely will translate to rice farmers producing perhaps two-thirds of what they did in years past.

The California Rice Commission said Friday that Sacramento Valley farmers planted 23 percent less rice acreage in 2014 than they did the previous year.

The amount of rice planted this year won't be finalized until later this spring.

"Every farmer is going to feel the pain," said Bryce Lundberg, vice president of agriculture for Lundberg Family Farms, which employs about 300 in its farming operations in Butte County. "But we're going to be utilizing every drop of water to the fullest ... We're going to grow as many crops as possible."

Growers cited various cooperative efforts related to maximizing water efficiency, including water district managers agreeing to delay the diversion of water out of the Sacramento River until later in the season to help salmon in the upper river.

Mark Biddlecomb, Western region director of Ducks Unlimited, noted that water applied to rice fields after harvest helps rice straw decompose, and Sacramento Valley fields also are a significant source of nourishment to millions of ducks and geese that travel along the Pacific Flyway each winter. Birds crowding into smaller areas, he noted, foster a breeding ground for illness.

David Guy, president of the Northern California Water Association, pointed out that, amid a blizzard of ominous drought headlines, Northern California growers "are a little better off" than their colleagues in other parts of the state. He cited substantial rainstorms in December and February. Growers also noted relatively good groundwater levels in the Sacramento Valley and regional reservoirs containing higher percentages of water than other locales.